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ABSTRACT

A multilingual basic writing course is an ideal laboratory for language learning for both second language students and native English speakers. This latter group at Bronx Community College (New York), which is located in a poor, minority urban community, are generally English-as-a-Second-Dialect (ESD) students. What one instructor tries to do is to focus on the commonalities among these groups and to provide group or collaborative opportunities. The commonalities among the two groups would include their age, the educational challenges, including their lapses in education and lack of writing experience, and a corresponding sense of low self-esteem. To make use of these commonalities, the instructor forms groups among the students, each group being composed of one native speaker and one second language speaker. The first activity is an interview, a writing and speaking activity through which students introduce each other to the class. In addition to making use of the commonalities, an instructor must be aware of the differences. He or she must keep in mind the immense difficulties facing the second language speaker, whose second language skills may be far from proficient by the time he or she enrolls in a basic writing course. Instructors should concentrate on global errors when reading student papers--errors that interfere with the conveyance of meaning--rather than small, grammatical errors, however exasperating they may be. (TB)

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Title: Looking for Commonalties in Culturally and Linguistically Mixed Basic Writing Classes

As I prepared this talk, I realized that I had two distinct concerns. One is the commonalties between L1 and L2 students; the other is the differences between the two groups and what those differences mean for Basic Writing instructors and for our ability to assess ESL writers. I'll begin with the easier part, the commonalties.

A multilingual basic writing course is an ideal laboratory for language learning for both ESL students and Native English speakers who at Bronx Community College, located in a poor, minority urban community, are generally ESD students. What I try to do is focus on the commonalties and to provide group or collaborative opportunities.

First what are the commonalties? In an urban community college such as BCC both the native speakers and the ESL students are older; 27 is the average age; both groups have had lapses in education, they often lack a traditional high school diploma, having obtained instead a GED degree. They also have had little writing experience in their earlier education, and a corollary of this is a lack of self-esteem which means that they tend to write very little, without development, either because they assume no one is interested in what they have to say or , as I am sometimes told, to avoid error. Furthermore, for many of our students the only hours where an interactive language experience in SE occurs are in the classroom.

Both ESL and ESD students also need experience with the requirements of academic writing: the concepts of defining, proving, of providing facts, reasons, and examples, of analyzing, in order to conclude, judge or predict with some validity. They need to learn to think in terms of relationships of words, sentences, paragraphs, that is of coherence and logical development. Both groups have communicated orally and therefore are likely to transpose from an oral code, meaning repeating for emphasis rather than adding new material; on the syntactical level they are likely to use the coordinating conjunction <u>and</u>, as an all purpose signal of relationships, not necessarily for addition of equal or parallel elements. As oral communicators in a restricted community, our students are used to receiving instant feedback from an audience of familiars, meaning initial utterances do not have to include qualifiers. Additionally, because they share

experiences and values with their audience, they can omit basics. Shifting to a written code means learning to imagine an audience of strangers, to anticipate questions, to delineate sentence boundaries for clarity and to indicate indirect and direct discourse. Furthermore, the vocabulary of BW students is likely to be unstable, switching from formal to informal, to dialect, to slang to an interlanguage or bridge language whenever lacunae in SE occur. And spelling is often governed by sound rather than sight.

These similarities notwithstanding, it is true that basic writers whose native language is English have distinct advantages over ESL students (all else being equal) even if they are ESD speakers. That is, they have an instinctive understanding of idiom and even if they are not in the habit of reproducing SE they have little difficulty understanding it. The group activities in my classroom focus on these commonalties and attempt to make use of the ESD students' advantages. A base group is made up of one native speaker and one ESL student. In this partnership English is the only means of communication available and it is hoped that a bond will develop that will reach beyond the classroom. The first activity is the interview, a writing and speaking activity, that I have Xeroxed for you. It is meant to encourages interaction between L1 and L2 students. First, because it takes place over several class meetings, it gives students a chance to develop a relationship with each other. Also, because students have a vested interest in how they will be introduced to the class, they show interest in providing details, in editing to make sure the presentation will be clear to the class, a heterogeneous and unknown audience.

The two partners form a base group that often will work with another base group on assignments that have to be presented to the class. They read each other's work before they share with another group or with the instructor. This continues with variations on assignments throughout the semester and it is generally successful.

I would like to turn now to the differences between L1 and L2 BW students for the last part of my talk because these differences present difficulties for BW instructors whose training has not been in ESL. There has been a tacit assumption that ESL students' needs will have been taken care

by the time they reach English courses. The partner model I have just described works best when it is possible to pair L1 and L2 students. However, as Nancy Lay has indicated the demographic projections of our urban area university tell us that the balance is changing. (I believe we are not the only urban area with this projection) By the year 2,000 the majority of students in CUNY will have language backgrounds other than English.. Indicative of this shift is the number of ESL students in basic writing courses: at Bronx increasing from one third to one half. Obviously, not all ESL students are BW students; however, a community college such as BCC has a somewhat different ESL population from that of the senior colleges -- and here I am relying on the kind of ESL writing senior college faculty describe at conferences like these, where the writing suggests that students are well trained in their native language. I would divide the ESL students in BW classes at Bronx into three different groups. First are those ESL students who have completed the ESL sequence but have not had much instruction in their own language due to war or extreme poverty. Therefore they may simply be beginning writers in any language <u>in addition to having to learn English</u>. A second group of ESL students in BW courses are those who have not been classified as ESL students because they have been in the country for longer than 7 years (the cutoff point for ESL designation and ESL courses), or they many even have been born here but are living in a language community other than English. Although they are not classified as ESL, they may need ESL as well as basic writing instruction. Finally, there are those who have had ESL instruction in the past but have stopped out. Because of the complexity of our students' lives many give up their education for long periods of time. We know that language learning, like dieting, is a long slow process, subject to plateauing, with sudden great strides and then backsliding, either temporary or permanent, due to interruption in practice, fatigue, relaxation or anxiety. Thus Students who may have completed an ESL sequence some time ago will enter a basic writing classroom having a lower level of English proficiency than their writing of several years past indicates. These ESL students, then, still need

instruction which one might consider specifically ESL and which BW instructor are not ready to handle.

Perhaps the most important factor is psychological. A Basic Writing instructor must keep in mind the difficulties of second language learning. We must look at English from the perspective of a foreign language learner; we can extrapolate from our own experiences. Still, from the stance of a foreign language learner, we can look into a handbook which has an ESL section . Confronting all of the exceptions, one quickly realizes what a daunting experience learning English is. Memorizing is not easy or effective for adults; Turning to logic, a rule, or a pattern may seem sensible when one is in doubt but it can be wrong. Grammaticality sometimes but not always requires redundancy. Based on pattern and logic, for example, a student (who has forgotten the rule) might erroneously conclude that would be wrong to have an "s" ending on only one verb form present tense. As Mina Shaughnessy says "Being wrong is often synonymous with being linguistically consistent or efficient at those points where the language is not."

No matter what the L1 is, similar difficulties in learning English occur, and it is now considered to be the nature of English rather than interference of L1 that causes problems, according to ESL experts, [Ilona Loki, Understanding ESL Writers A Guide for Teachers]. Therefore they question the usefulness of contrastive analysis. Nevertheless, I would argue that for the BW instructor, it is useful and instructive to learn about patterns of thought and syntax; of means of showing number, tense, and gender in other languages.

Such knowledge may prevent BW instructors from panic attacks when they encounter the ungrammaticalities of ESL students. Frustration over seemingly incomprehensible errors can lead to overvaluing the import of local grammatical errors, such as absent articles, just because they are easily recognizable. When assessing ESL writing, global errors, that is those errors that interfere with meaning, should be given most weight. However, "interfering with meaning" is a relative concept. If the vocabulary and the range of syntactical choices is so limiting that it constricts meaning

local can become global as I would argue it does in examples A and B of the handouts I have given you.

Understanding likely causes of error and distinguishing between global and local error do not mean that we want to dismiss error. We want to give our BW students the possibility of succeeding in the academic setting and in the terms of the academy. One question is where we draw lines when we assess writing. Another is how to continue to provide interactive experiences in English- which I consider the best way to learn language- in the increasingly ESL environment I have mentioned. I do not find easy or obvious answers to these questions.

Marsha Cummins
Assignment for English 01 - Handout at 4 C's 1995

Assignment: The Interview and Introduction

You and your partner are going to interview each other and then introduce each other to the class.

1. Prepare questions you think will encourage your partner to talk about him or herself. They should be designed to give a general picture of your partner.
2. Take notes on what your partner says, for you will have to write your presentation. Make sure you have some direct quotations to suggest the personality of your partner. (See p. of our text).
3. Find one area to develop at greater length. A key to finding such an area is something that you become curious about as you asked your questions.
4. Write a draft and show it to your partner to verify spelling and facts.
5. At home write your presentation, adding whatever details will give the class a vivid sense, a word picture, of your partner.
6. After you introduce your partner, hand in your paper.